Iran is a critical regional actor in the Near East. Opinions vary about the role it plays. The roundtable brings together experts from the region and the U.S. to explore key dynamics that shape Iran’s interactions in the Gulf Arab region, in major Arab conflict zones, and with Turkey and Israel.

Speakers:
Dr. Hamad Albloshi, Dr. Abdullah Baabood, Dr. Saeed M. Badeeb, Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, Dr. Nursin A. Guney, Dr. Ahmad Iravani, Ambassador (Ret.) Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Dr. Özden Zeynep Oktav, Dr. Steven N. Simon

Convener and Moderator: 
Dr. Banafsheh Keynoush

10/19/18 | 12 pm – 7pm | Palmer House
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
THE SHARMIN AND BIJAN MOSSAVAR-RAHMANI CENTER FOR
IRAN AND PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

ROUNDTABLE REPORT
THE NEAR EAST: IRAN’S INTERREGIONAL DYNAMICS

October 19, 2018

Banafsheh Keynoush
Convener and Moderator

SPEAKERS
Dr. Hamad H. Albloshi, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Kuwait University

Dr. Abdullah Baabood, Former Director of Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University

Dr. Saeed M. Badeeb, Independent Scholar, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Dr. Michael Cook, Acting Director, The Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Princeton University

Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker, Visiting Lecturer and Diplomat-In-Residence, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University

Dr. Nursin A. Guney, Dean, Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences, Bahçeşehir Cyprus University

Dr. Ahmad Iravani, Executive Director, Center for the Study of Islam and the Middle East

Dr. Banafsheh Keynoush, Convener and Moderator, The Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies, Princeton University

Ambassador (Ret.) Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Program on Science and Global Security, Princeton University

Dr. Özden Zeynep Oktav, Professor, Istanbul Medeniyet Universitesi Akademik Veri Yönetim Sistemi, Faculty of Political Science, Department of International Relations

Professor Steven N. Simon, Visiting Professor of History, Amherst College
INVITED GUESTS

Salam Fayyad, Visiting Senior Scholar and Daniella Lipper Coules ’95 Distinguished Visitor in Foreign Affairs, Princeton University

Dr. Michael Reynolds, Associate Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University

Dr. Lindsey Stephenson, Post-Graduate Research Associate, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University

Dr. Makio Yamada, Post-Doctoral Research Associate, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University

MEMBERS OF THE SHARMIN AND BIJAN MOSSAVAR-RAHMANI CENTER FOR IRAN AND PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

Dr. Daniel Beckman, Postdoctoral Research Associate

Dr. Jo-Ann Gross, Visiting Research Collaborator; Professor of History, The College of New Jersey

Reagan Maraghy, Center Manager

Dr. Amin Moghadam, Associate Research Scholar

Becky Parnian, Event Coordinator

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Michael Brill, PhD Candidate, Department of Near Eastern Studies

Maha Al-Fahim, Senior, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

James Fromson, Candidate for Masters in Public Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

Ahmed al-Maazami, PhD Candidate, Department of Near Eastern Studies

Mathew Miller, Senior, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

Madeline Pollack, Senior, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

Sepideh Soltaninia, Candidate for Masters in Public Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs

Henrietta Toivanen, PhD Candidate, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
INTRODUCTION

On October 19, 2018, The Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies hosted a by invitation only roundtable discussion entitled The Near East: Iran’s Interregional Dynamics. The event brought together experts from the region and the United States, to participate in three moderated panels convened for half a day at Princeton University. Attempts to bring participants from Iran or have them participate by videoconference were unsuccessful. Experts presented papers on pre-selected topics, exchanged views, and responded to questions from invited guests at the roundtable. Guests included Princeton University students, faculty, scholars, staff, and members of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center. Discussions focused on relations between Iran and the Gulf Arab States, Iran’s periphery relations with Turkey and Israel, and Iran’s involvement in Arab conflict zones in the Near East region. To encourage openness and free discussions, panel sessions were not recorded. Individuals who wished to write about the ideas discussed at the sessions could only quote what was said without attribution. At the conclusion of the event, findings from the roundtable were collected and made available in the following analytical report written by the moderator. The report is a summary of the views expressed by the participants, not a position paper expressing the views of the moderator or the Mossavar-Rahmani Center. While names of participants in the roundtable are included in the report, comments or ideas expressed are not attributed to any specific individual.

IRAN AND THE GULF ARAB STATES

The first panel, entitled Iran and the Gulf Arab States, examined how members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) engage with Iran, according to views expressed by the participants. There is a lack of consensus about Iran among its Gulf Arab neighbors. They agree that Iran’s desire to alter geopolitical calculations in the Arab world dampens enthusiasm in the region to work with it. Since the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has exported its Shia ideology across the region. As a result, segments of the population in the Gulf Arab states harbor sympathies for Iran’s revolution and its founder Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeni who died in 1989. Saudi Arabia is deeply concerned by Iran’s interventions in Arab affairs, given historic Iranian-Saudi regional rivalries. The smaller Gulf Arab states of the GCC (i.e. Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates) fear the destabilizing impact on the region of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. To an extent, they believe that these tensions may threaten regional stability more than Iran’s interventions in the Arab world. As a result, they aim to keep balanced relations with Iran or at least attempt to maintain cordial relations with it. They also view Iran as a power that is capable of standing up to Saudi Arabia’s dominant role in Gulf affairs.

Iran’s most contentious relationship with a neighboring Gulf country is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The kingdom cut its diplomatic relations with Iran after a mob attack on its embassy in Tehran that was triggered by Riyadh’s decision to execute the Shia cleric Nimr Baqir al-Nimr in January 2016. Other GCC states subsequently severed or downgraded their relations with Iran. Bahrain cut off its relations with Iran. But Kuwait, Oman and Qatar have maintained an ongoing relationship with Iran. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), which often condemns Iran’s actions in the region, retained diplomatic representation in Tehran.
The tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia began shortly after the revolution. Saudi Arabia along with Kuwait had tried to appease revolutionary Iran by sending delegations to Tehran to explore ways to improve relations with Iran’s new revolutionary government. The occupation of the US embassy in Tehran by revolutionary students on November 4, 1979, however, discouraged Saudi Arabia from pursuing relations with Iran. Khomeini’s assertive leadership was also a problem, especially because he encouraged revolt among both the Arab Shias and other Arab Sunni dissidents who called for the overthrow of Arab monarchies. Kuwait initially viewed the revolution as a pluralistic political force because it had support from both Islamic and leftist Iranian political groups. As Kuwait struggled to accommodate its own diverse political groups, it saw inspiration in the early inclusiveness of the Iranian revolution. It believed that Iran’s pluralistic revolutionary experience might encourage the Arab states to reach out to the internal opposition forces including members of the disgruntled Arab Shia communities, the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, and the vocal Arab Marxists. Furthermore, Khomeini’s long exile in Iraq and his desire to move to Kuwait before the revolution suggested that he might have sympathies for Arab social and political concerns, and friendly intentions towards the Kuwaitis.

In September 1980, the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War reversed the outreach by Arab states to Iran. Though it was Iraq that attacked Iran, Tehran’s ability to mobilize the Shia masses to fight Saddam Hussein’s army immediately caused regional concerns that it could fan sectarian divides. This led to fears that Tehran could exploit existing state-society tensions in the Gulf monarchies. Iran’s vocal support for the Arab Shias clearly threatened the fabric of Gulf societies. It encouraged revolts against the Arab monarchies. But Tehran’s actions also marginalized Arab Shias as citizens of the Arab world. These Shias were potential targets of political retribution carried out by radical Sunni Arab groups. In some cases, the Gulf monarchies succeeded in bridging the political divides that caused friction between their Sunni and Shia populations. But in other cases, they offered concessions to radical Sunni opposition groups in return for guarantees that the Arab Shias would not be harmed. In short, Iran’s revolution was not the blessing that Tehran thought it always was for the Shia masses across the region. The revolution proved to also be a disservice to the Shias it compromised in the Arab world, and failed to protect, in order to put pressure on its Gulf Arab neighbors to halt support for Iraq during the war.

Iran’s actions were especially detrimental for Bahrain and Kuwait where Shias constitute a significant number of the local population. Iran’s support for the Bahraini Shia-led National Islamic Society, or Al Wefaq party, which once included prominent members in the Bahraini parliament, gradually isolated the party from mainstream politics. Its leader Ali Salman, who received a life sentence in November 2018, was believed to operate under foreign influence, and to give allegiance not to Bahrain but to the Shia clerical establishments across the Gulf region in which Iran also plays an influential role. Kuwait specifically was concerned that Iran’s export of its Shia ideology, and military menace to the Gulf Arab region, meant that it would maintain predominant power in the Persian Gulf waterway, a lifeline for Kuwait’s energy exports.

Kuwait’s previous experience with Iran had shown that it should not underestimate the destabilizing influence Tehran had over Gulf monarchies. Under the Pahlavis, the rise of political dissent in Iran had inspired Arab opposition groups. When Mohammed Reza Shah visited
Kuwait in 1968, a Marxist group opposed to Iran’s hegemonic ambitions in the region known as the Revolutionary Popular Movement in Kuwait, or al-Ḥaraka al-Thawriyya al-Shaʿbiyya fi al-Kuwait, planted explosives to sabotage the Shah’s state visit. Arab leftist groups including Kuwaiti Marxists opposed Iran’s occupation of three Gulf islands in 1971. Iran claims that those islands belong to it, but the occupation alarmed Kuwaiti society about Iran’s hegemonic ambitions. Iran had taken over the control of the three disputed islands of Abu Musa, the Greater Tunb and the Lesser Tunb by dispatching military forces to protect the islands once the British forces pulled out of the Persian Gulf region upon granting the Arab sheikhdoms their independence. Iran would later disregard an agreement worked out with the British and the sheikhdoms to hand over the administration of the three islands to the UAE by 1991.

In more recent times, as Iran’s Arab neighbors have become more adept at containing and managing local dissent, concerns about Iran have narrowed down to two main areas: charges that it sponsors terrorism, and that it harbors a nuclear program with the potential to have weapons components. The Arab states of the Gulf region fear Iran’s ability to operate proxies, including Arab citizens, willing to engage in acts of terrorism. This could lead to the creation of large numbers of armed recruits willing to act on Iran’s behalf to sabotage the governments in the region. Iran’s use of its diplomatic missions for diversion of financial and logistical support to various proxy groups in the Arab world means that its foreign policy is intertwined with its ideological and revolutionary goals.

Since Iran’s nuclear program predates the Islamic revolution, it implies to its Arab neighbors that its nuclear ambitions may persist. There is a fear among the Arab states that Tehran could develop nuclear weapons if given the opportunity. The international community’s apparent lack of proper monitoring and supervision mechanisms, and Iran’s past reported digressions means that its Arab neighbors must remain on the alert. Though the Gulf Arab States supported the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal, key countries of the Near East remain divided about how effective the deal was. Opinions in the region vary about Iran’s real and potential nuclear capabilities, with Israel being strongly opposed to Iran possessing any weapons capability and know-how, Turkey and Saudi Arabia along with the UAE seeking a nuclear-free zone for the region, and Qatar remaining partly unconcerned about the Iranian nuclear program. In general terms, the GCC agrees that it is best not to interfere in Iran’s nuclear program as long as its leaders assure the international community of the program’s peaceful intentions. Qatar’s stance defending Iran’s right to a peaceful nuclear program, however, has alarmed Saudi Arabia. Qatari overtures to Iran over its nuclear program could complicate the Saudi kingdom’s task of coordinating GCC policies on the issue especially as various members of the group try to develop independent nuclear programs of their own.

As a conservative Arab state, Saudi Arabia is also concerned by revolutionary Iran’s adherence to what is commonly labeled among Sunnis as raʿfid, in effect the rejection of the dominant Sunni faith. This implies that Iran is set on promoting and building its own vision of what the Muslim world should look like. It also means that Iran will insist on its Shia ideology as a self-serving tool to build influence across the Near East region. The spread of this ideology could work as a protective umbrella, shielding Iran to more easily advance its regional interests and ambitions. As a result, the Saudi kingdom is guarded when Iran attempts to engage with the Gulf Arab
States. Saudi Arabia is particularly concerned by Iran’s ability to turn Arabs against Arabs by inciting political unrest in the Gulf region and in its Shia communities. The better Iran gets in advancing these tactics, the easier it will be to divide the GCC on the question of how to deal with Tehran.

Iran’s ability to influence communities in the Gulf region has divided the Arab monarchies, and they disagree over how best to temper Iranian activities. Saudi Arabia has attempted to lead the group on this issue, but its role overshadows attempts by the smaller Gulf Arab States to operate independently. Saudi Arabia maintains that it cannot sit idle, but that it must push back against Iranian regional interventions, especially those that threaten the kingdom directly. This includes Iran’s desire to question Saudi Arabia’s ability to administer the hajj and the holy mosques in Makkah and Madinah, seen by the kingdom as a constant act of provocation. The kingdom views efforts by the Houthis in Yemen that are reportedly encouraged by the Iranians, at launching missiles in the direction of Riyadh and Makkah, as a deliberate act of violence against civilians and the millions of pilgrims who come to the holy city from around the world. The smaller Gulf States are keen to avoid directly confronting Iran over the issue, mindful of Tehran’s ability to provocatively project military power across the region. They prefer instead to stay away from tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Though that is not always possible, these smaller Gulf States try to discourage Riyadh from imposing its policy choices on them when it comes to dealing with Tehran. This means that they try to avoid actions that might be construed by Iran as interfering in its foreign and security affairs.

As a result, there are tensions in relations between Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states, and the former often encourages the body to take sides with it against Iran. The Saudi kingdom has been more successful persuading Bahrain to follow its policies, especially after the Bahraini uprising in the wake of the Arab Spring on February 14, 2011. On March 14, a month after the protests began, Bahrain invoked a GCC security clause to invite Saudi and GCC forces to the country under the aegis of the Peninsula Shield Force, and GCC financial assistance to the tune of $10 billion. Though Bahrain is relatively calm now, it remains at the center of the competition between Tehran and Riyadh for regional influence, and it possesses strategic value for both. Bahrainis voted to be independent of both Iran and Saudi Arabia through a referendum in 1970. But Iran has never quite accepted the outcome of the referendum either before or after its revolution, especially because it was encouraged by Saudi Arabia to allow Bahrainis to vote for their future independence. Saudi Arabia also thwarted an attempt by Iran to claim the island prior to the revolution by stalling the kingdom’s initiative along with Bahrain to form a federation of Gulf Arab states. However, given Bahrain’s majority Shia population that is connected ethnically to Saudi Arabia’s Shias but politically to Iran, the Saudi kingdom believes that it must prevent Iranian influence over Bahrain. In this context, Bahrain’s interest is to navigate the troubled waters between Iran and Saudi Arabia by keeping a healthy distance from both, though its policy statements on Iran support the Saudi positions.

Saudi Arabia is forging stronger political bonds with the UAE, though their actions in the region are not always complementary. The UAE is increasingly assertive in the conduct of its regional foreign policy. When it comes to Iran, Saudi Arabia is closely watching UAE decisions. Through its embassy in Abu Dhabi, Iran had asked the UAE to withdraw forces from Yemen, a country where Saudi Arabia has received UAE support to fight a long proxy war with the Houthis.
Washington’s call for an end to the Saudi-UAE offensive in Yemen in mid 2018 has further encouraged the UAE to embrace the idea, and Saudi Arabia has followed the UAE by saying that it will support Washington’s decisions over Yemen.

The UAE is reluctant to completely detach itself from Iran given deep historic connections between the two, and ample possibilities of trade and commerce that have long existed between them. In dealing with Iran, this makes it harder for UAE leaders to bring coherence to the individual economic policies of its seven different emirates, especially Dubai and Sharjah. Iran’s close connections with these emirates are strengthened by the large Iranian community in the UAE, mostly residing in Dubai, and the Iranian Arab community in the southern regions of Iran. Abu Dhabi’s predominance over the other UAE emirates due to its economic wealth and its recent strong ties with Riyadh has led to its vocal political support for Saudi Arabia. Over the past decade, Abu Dhabi has emerged as a strategic hawk on the Iranian nuclear issue, even as Dubai explored trade with Iran until harsh international sanctions against the country kicked in. The UAE policy now supports President Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, and his administration’s policy of resuming sanctions against Iran.

Qatar retains diplomatic relations with Iran, and sees the country as an essential economic and security partner, in part so it may continue to peacefully extract its natural wealth shared with Iran in the huge gas field of the North Dome/South Pars. It views Iran’s attempts to influence Shias in the region as less of a threat, and encourages cultural and economic relations with the Iranians. But it also conducts its relations with Tehran in a calculated manner, mindful not to unduly upset its GCC neighbors or the Trump administration, given the large number of US troops that are stationed in Qatar. It goes without saying that the presence of these forces gives Qatar a sense of security against Iran and its GCC neighbors. The latter consideration is especially important given Washington’s important role in easing tensions among GCC states since June 2017, after Qatar was sanctioned by Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. But Qatar has a number of joint economic, commercial and security agreements with Iran to abide by. As a result, it must carefully manage its security relations with Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and army. To Saudi Arabia, security contacts between Doha and Tehran imply that the IRGC has at least one foot on Qatari land. This gives the Iranians an opportunity to influence Qatar’s decisions in dealing with the GCC. Before it came under the Saudi-led embargo, Qatar had for many years avoided antagonizing either Iran or Saudi Arabia. The embargo, however, provided Iran with the opportunity to drive a wedge into the GCC, by providing Doha with substitutes for the embargoed food exports to Qatar. Iran also allowed Qatari aircraft and ships to access its airspace and territory to bypass the blockade. In July 2017, Doha and Tehran signed a new trade agreement, and the following month, Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran after it had downgraded those ties following the attack in Tehran on the Saudi embassy.

Oman’s deep historic connections to Iran, and the sharing of the strategically important Strait of Hormuz, have allowed it to retain cordial if not close relations with Iran. Iran and Oman have concluded a number of security agreements and conducted joint naval exercises in the Sea of Oman. In May 2018, Iran and Oman held the 14th meeting of a joint commission to expand cooperation between the military and police forces of the two countries. Saudi Arabia is concerned that Iran and Oman exchange military information and barter military objects between them. Since the Arab Spring, which affected Oman, Muscat and Tehran have also tried to
develop closer economic, energy, and cultural ties. If anything, Qatar’s blockade by other GCC states has shown Oman the need to keep friendships with others in the region, including Iran. But Oman has been guarded and cautious over opening up its economy to Iran given international sanctions. Oman’s foreign policy strategy is to maintain relative equilibrium in ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and to discourage interference by either in Omani domestic affairs. Oman also offers to act as a mediator in regional disputes that involve Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, Muscat sponsored secretive ceasefire talks between Tehran and Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War, between Iran and the GCC after the war, and more recently it attempted to ease the tensions between the US and Iran before and after the nuclear deal. It is well known that Muscat acted as a go-between for the parties in 2012-2013, and hosted the secret talks that led to the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal.

Kuwait prefers to stay neutral toward Iran as long as it can, but the task is not easy. It prefers to avoid the tensions that it had with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, and attempts to play a mediatory role with Iran that is not always welcomed by other GCC members, including Saudi Arabia. Kuwait appreciated Iran’s neutral stance and hosting of Kuwaiti refugees when Iraq invaded Kuwait in the Gulf War in 1990. But since then, Iranian-Kuwaiti relations have deteriorated rather than improved because of the discovery of two cells in Kuwait charged with working with Iran in 2010 and 2015, and Tehran’s rivalry with Riyadh. The deterioration of relations with Iran impacted Kuwait’s internal politics. In 2011, Sunni Islamists in the Kuwaiti parliament impeached former Prime Minister Nassir al-Muhammad al-Sabah for refusing to take action to counter Iran’s interference in Kuwait’s domestic affairs. The prime minister was also blamed for refusing to back the Saudi military operation in Bahrain in March 2011. Though the impeachment did not lead to any specific action against the prime minister, it spoke of rising discontent inside Kuwait about Iran. Following Iran’s support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the wake of the Syrian Arab Spring, the Iranian flag was burned in Kuwait for the first time, an act that was condemned by the Kuwaiti government. But anti-Iranian trends persist, including among members of parliament and other prominent figures such as well-known politicians and writers like Abdullah al-Nafisi who has for years advocated for a tougher stance on Iran. Kuwait recalled its ambassador from Iran after the attack on the Saudi embassy in January 2016, but it did not cut off its diplomatic relations.

Kuwait is home to large numbers of Iranian migrants who often cause local resentment for spreading their culture in Kuwait, and stirring political sympathies for Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, some Iranian Kuwaitis hung Khomeini’s pictures in their homes. The Iranian influence in Kuwait even affected members of parliament, a body that was split over the government’s decision to lend money to Iraq during the war. The Kuwaiti-Iranian Friendship Society is run by local politicians and activists, and plays an important public diplomacy role with Iran. Iranian Kuwaiti Shias are generally split into three main groups. The first group includes those who supported Khomeini as a source of emulation, including a political party called the Islamic National Alliance (INA). Members of this group fought against Iraq when it invaded Kuwait, and have since remained loyal to the Kuwaiti state. A second group, known as the Shiraziyya whose members follow Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi and before him his brother Ayatollah Muhammad al-Shirazi, is represented by the political wing of the Assembly of Justice and Peace or Tajammu’ al-Adala wa al-Salam. In March 2018, Ayatollah Sadiq’s son, Hussein, was arrested in Qom because of his criticism of the Iranian government and the concept of Vilayat-i Faqih (rule of the
Islamic jurist). Khomeini advocated the concept to justify clerical political authority over Iran. A third group includes followers of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani who resides in Iraq. Though the group criticizes the Iranian government privately, it refrains from doing so publicly. The group does not have a political party in Kuwait, preferring to work with other existing parties in the country.

The government of Kuwait attempts to maintain balanced connections with Kuwaiti Shias, and it has eyes on expanding trade with a stable Iran to reach markets in Asia under the Kuwaiti development vision of 2030. Kuwait continues to engage Iran in a regional dialog despite occasional disagreements over the issue with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman’s clear stance against Iranian regional interventions, Saudi Arabia’s lukewarm participation at the 38th meeting of the GCC held in Kuwait in December 2017, and the Crown Prince’s shorter-than-planned visit with the Emir of Kuwait Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah in September 2018, backfired in Kuwait. Kuwait sees the lack of internal dialog within the GCC about Iran as all the more reason to pursue relations with the country independently of the body.

IRAN, TURKEY AND ISRAEL

The same balancing considerations between the core Gulf Arab States and Iran apply in Iran’s other regional interactions. The second panel, entitled Iran, Turkey and Israel, looked at these three periphery non-Arab states in the region, according to the views expressed by the participants. Iran is often in competition with the two other periphery states of Turkey and Israel to influence the region. As a result, balancing between them can verge on brinkmanship. But despite their competition, there is a desire by all three of the periphery states to avoid disrupting the balance of power in the region in a manner that would allow the core Arab states to threaten them.

Turkey has developed an “issue-based” partnership with Iran. It compartmentalizes the key challenges that face Ankara and Tehran, and resolves to find solutions for them. Some of these challenges include ensuring gas imports from Iran despite international sanctions against the country’s energy sector, and managing regional conflicts in which Iran plays a role. Ensuring cordial if not friendly ties allows Ankara and Tehran to address these challenges. The two agree on certain issues. For example, they seek to have energy cooperation despite US efforts to sanction Iran’s energy industry. Both opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, mindful that it could disturb the region’s security. But they can also disagree. Turkey opposed Iran’s decision to send military advisors, on invitation by Damascus, to support the Syrian army after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Back then and in the immediate following years after the conflict broke out, Turkey did not want President Bashar al-Assad in Syria to remain in power.

The Syrian crisis highlights diverging threat perceptions in Iran and Turkey. The Syrian government is Iran’s ally, and a conduit for Iran’s influence in the Levant region. Syria was in fact the only Arab state to support Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Anxious to reciprocate the favor, Tehran cast the uprising against Bashar al-Assad, whose power base rests on his ties with the Syrian Alawites, as a rebellion funded largely by the Sunni states in the region. Ankara firmly backed the moderate forces fighting Assad, including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other forces that it viewed as moderate political groups. The proxy battles in Syria that ensued
between different internal and external actors as a result of the breakdown of central authority over the country confused relations between Iran and Turkey.

Iran’s brief détente with Egypt following the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammad Morsi in 2012 offered a break in tensions between Tehran and Ankara, but Morsi was ousted the next year by a military-led coup. Turkey meanwhile was briefly labeled as a “jihadist highway” for new recruits that traveled through the country to join the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The siege by ISIS forces of Kobane near the border with Turkey in 2014 forced Ankara to see how the Syrian crisis could potentially impact Turkey’s domestic security. It could, for example, provoke action by the Turkish Kurds who were angered by the plight of the Syrian Kurds in Kobane. Ankara responded by supporting the movement of Kurdish Peshmarga forces into Syria to defend Kobane. Luckily for Ankara, the Kobane crisis failed to divide Turkey’s minority Alawite and majority Sunni populations. Among the small minority of Alawites in Turkey, some were staunchly pro-Assad, but generally the Alawites in Turkey did not represent an organized political force.

These realities shifted all previous political calculations that Turkey had made about Syria. Turkey began recognizing the importance of having closer contacts with Iran to resolve the conflict in Syria. Turkey’s subsequent successful operations against ISIS strongholds in Syria meant that it could also perhaps address the Kurdish threat from Syria with Iran’s help. Both Iran and Turkey had to contend with potential demands for autonomy by the Syrian Kurds. These demands could cause unrest among the Kurdish populations in Iran and Turkey. As a result, Ankara and Tehran were careful not to over-empower the Syrian Kurds in the course of advancing political goals in Syria. An empowered Syrian Kurdish community could jeopardize the security along the borders between Iran and Turkey, home to many dissident Kurds. Ankara also believed that Tehran had the means to influence the opposition Kurdish group in Turkey, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). Tehran suspected that Ankara had the opportunity to monitor the opposition Kurdish group in Iran, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PEJAK), which received support from a number of regional countries in order to challenge the authority of Iran’s central government. In Syria, Ankara and Tehran disagreed on how to manage the Kurdish-led People’s Protection Units (YPG). Though the group collaborated with the US to fight the Islamic State, Iran chose not to see the YPG as a problem. Earlier, Assad had offered the YPG a promise of autonomy in return for fighting the Islamic State, but Tehran understood that the dynamics between Damascus and the YPG could constantly shift given the turmoil in Syria. Turkey, however, saw the group as a military wing of the PKK, and initiated operations inside Syria against it in early 2018. Its attention shifted back to working with Iran when the YPG received weapons from the US, though Washington had said that it would not send arms to the group and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighting Assad including YPG members.

Iran, Turkey and Russia subsequently embarked on several rounds of peace talks on Syria under the Astana process initiated in early 2017. These included talks in Sochi in November 2017, in Ankara in April 2018, and in Tehran in September 2018. Since Turkey never viewed Iran or Russia as a direct threat, it was able to quickly flip its policies over Syria to accommodate the interests of all three states. The ability to compartmentalize the Syrian problem with Iran in the course of the Astana Talks allowed Ankara to look for new strategies. One strategy involved drawing a clearer distinction between moderate groups and the radical forces fighting Assad in Syria, and opting to accommodate the moderates. Iran was uneasy about the distinction, as it
believed that picking up arms against the Assad government was an act of terrorism regardless of whether it involved moderate or radical armed groups. The strategy would also allow Turkey to retain influence over armed groups in Syria that Iran was unable to work with. But Iran continued to cooperate with Turkey and Russia to appease the moderate armed groups.

This “issue-based” cooperation between Iran and Turkey has often worked despite shortcomings in building a broader strategic partnership between the two. The need by both to balance tensions with Washington ensures the continuity of the partnership between Ankara and Tehran. Iran is a reliable neighbor for Turkey in this respect. The two have not gone to war with each other in recent times, despite the numerous wars fought between the Persian and Ottoman empires throughout history. Iran was the first country to condemn the attempted coup against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 15, 2016, and to offer a clear position on the issue. It categorically defended the need to preserve stable governments in the region at a time when many in Turkey believed that Washington had encouraged the coup. President Erdogan has in turn condemned the renewed US sanctions against Iran set in place in 2018.

Turkey also understands that it is dealing with a new world when it comes to the Near East region. The region’s shifting geopolitical and economic realities require Ankara to work with Tehran. Turkey, a country that is only 26 percent energy sufficient, believes that Iran is key to meeting its energy needs for the foreseeable future. Though Turkey can diversify its oil supplies, it is keen to receive sustained waivers by the US Treasury to be able to import gas from Iran. Turkey’s oil refiner Tupraş decreased crude oil purchases from Iran in anticipation of the sanctions. But the existence of legally binding gas agreements between Iran and Turkey obliges Ankara to pay the price of the gas whether it brings it home or not. During the enforcement of the sanctions regime imposed on Iran under the Obama administration from 2009 onward, the US government showed flexibility in allowing Turkey to buy natural gas from Iran. Since the resumption of sanctions against Iran in 2018, Turkey has expected a similar understanding with the Trump administration to temporarily continue to buy gas from Iran.

Under the Obama administration, Turkey was also able to help barter goods with Iran and offer transactions in gold, exchanged into foreign currencies in third countries like the UAE, to allow trade with Iran despite sanctions. But Turkey may not be able to use this experience moving forward to trade with Iran. Hakan Atilla, the deputy general manager of Halbank responsible for these transactions was charged and found guilty in the US of ignoring the sanctions against Iran. Though Ankara rejected the legal case, the fact is that Iran’s gold and precious metals have already been sanctioned, and the US is keen to block any attempts to transfer money to Iran under the new sanctions regime, unless for humanitarian purposes.

Turkey is keen to follow the European Union model of maintaining relations with Iran despite renewed sanctions. To Turkey, the challenge of resolving the issue of the sanctions is a critical component of its ongoing relations with Iran, and it seeks to keep open any loopholes it can to allow for a smoother partnership with Iran, including the option of transactions in local currencies. A second wave of sanctions on Iran’s energy industry led by the Trump administration in November 2018 is politically significant from Turkey’s standpoint. Turkey is concerned by potential regional restrictions on its trade and energy options caused by these sanctions, especially as tensions with Saudi Arabia mount over the murder of Saudi journalist
Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul in October 2018. Under a strict sanctions regime, it is clear that Turkey cannot trade as much as it would like with Iran. The Trump administration has taken steps to curtail trade with Iran through re-export terminals in the region, and bar Iran from exchanging goods with its neighbors including Oman, Turkey and the UAE, closing loopholes that may allow the circumventing of the sanctions regime. Though Ankara wishes to comply with any international sanctions regimes against Iran, it has viewed such sanctions as unjust not just to Iran but to Turkish interests.

Turkey wants the Iran nuclear deal to stay in force. It is mindful that Iran is a threshold nuclear state, and it supports efforts to try to prevent Iran from achieving nuclear weapons capability. But it believes that the best path is to bring Iran to abide by state obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). But Tehran’s offensive capabilities (ranging from its missiles to asymmetrical security instruments like Shia forces abroad) and offensive intentions (revisionist demands of Iran to increase its power and influence in the Levant at the expense of other regional powers including Turkey) have always concerned decision makers in Turkey. As a result, Ankara has for instance closely watched Iranian activities in Iraq especially with the local Iraqi Kurdish parties to see if Iran would be willing to play a stabilizing role there that would accommodate Turkey’s interests as well.

Turkey’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has dampened Iran’s desire to work with it closely on military and security issues. Since 2015, Turkey’s military strategy has focused on forward defense in Iraq and Syria. Iran considers Turkey a status-quo power, but one that aims to limit Iranian regional outreach, and cause disruptions along the way. Though Iran and Turkey both stress support for the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, often they have not had mutually supportive or harmonious interests in those countries. For example, Turkey supported Iraqi Kurdistan Region’s president, Masoud Barzani, despite his calls for a Kurdish referendum for independence within Iraq, which Tehran rejects. Iran views the presence of Turkish forces in Syria as a long-term threat to Assad’s future and an impediment to Iran’s advance toward the Mediterranean Sea. Ankara is angered by the brutality of the Syrian war and its humanitarian cost, and deeply doubts that Assad can hold on to power legitimately. It is also deeply concerned by the influence of the Iranian-backed Shia fighters in Syria and their ability to divide the region into pro and anti Iran countries. Other concerns involve Iran’s ability to influence the future constitutional order in Syria, as well as the fate of the Syrian opposition.

Turkey recognizes that the Iranian security system is too entrenched to look beyond these constraints that impede a strategic partnership with Ankara. It therefore insists on compartmentalizing its security concerns with Iran mostly to isolate immediate issues that need to be addressed by the two states. As a result, Iran fears being excluded from the larger political and security calculations that Turkey might consider with Russia to manage the Syrian crisis. Turkey and Russia agreed in the aftermath of the recent Tehran Summit held in September 2018 to halt Syrian army assaults on armed opposition groups in Idlib. Iran has insisted on clearing Idlib of the armed opposition groups, fearing that Turkey might be able to use those groups to advance to Aleppo, a critical strategic lifeline for the Syrian government. Turkey vowed to disarm the radical armed groups around Idlib by mid-October 2018, and said that the goal was achieved by October 8, 2018. But Russia’s announcement of building demilitarized zones around Idlib to separate the opposition from Syrian government strongholds, and allow for the passage
of armed groups monitored by Turkish and Russian forces on the ground alarmed Iran. Iran accepted the deal, however, to prevent the collapse of the Astana Talks initiated by Russia to discuss the Syrian crisis in February 2017. It also worked closely with Russia to secure Idlib and prevent potential opposition advances into Aleppo. But Iran feared that Turkey and Russia would demand that the Iranian forces that are stationed in Syria to leave the country, or pressure Assad’s government to call for the departure of Iranian forces.

In 2018, Israel escalated aerial attacks on Iranian-backed military installations in Syria. Iran understood that it had to appease Israel, Turkey and Russia quickly or risk further losses in Syria caused by the Israeli air strikes. Turkey and Russia, unlike Iran, had working relationships with Israel. That meant that Iran could not rely on either to condemn or halt the Israeli air attacks. Turkey and Russia in turn wanted to avoid an accidental war between Iran and Israel. The trajectory of Iranian-Israeli relations had not been so hostile in the past. This meant that options could be explored to de-escalate the conflict between them in Syria. Iranian-backed forces were pushed back from Israeli borders with Syria, through an agreement that Israel reached with Russia.

Within Israel, however, views on Iran remain divided. Many Israelis recall a time when Iran’s role was important to them in the pre-state Zionist era in Palestine. Both before and after the establishment of the Israeli state in 1948, Iran had assisted with the resettlement of Jews in Palestine. More importantly, the pre-state Zionist doctrine called for cooperation with the large periphery states of Iran and Turkey as well as Ethiopia, in order to leapfrog the ever-rising number of Arab enemies that a Zionist state would have. Long after the establishment of Israel as a new state, the Israeli diplomat Uri Lubrani successfully ran a virtual embassy in Tehran before the Iranian revolution from 1973 to 1978. While most other countries in the region refused to grant de facto recognition to Israel, Lubrani’s efforts allowed a real friendship to evolve between Iran and Israel. But the revolution sent shock waves into Israel, which for way too long since then has suffered from a cognitive handicap and denial in dealing with the new Iranian challenge.

As a result, for a while after the revolution, Israel continued to provide sensitive intelligence to the revolutionary government in Iran, and briefly helped supply arms to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. It also successfully pulled the Reagan administration into believing in the strategic importance of Israel’s ties with the periphery states. Israelis even believed that supplying the arms to Iran, done through a secret deal, would allow them to establish ties with moderates in Iran’s revolutionary ranks who could be encouraged to bring about regime change in Tehran.

In June 1982, Israel’s invasion of Lebanon led Iran and Syria to deepen their cooperation against Israel. It was a dynamic that re-shaped strategic alliances in the Middle East, which Israel and the US were slow to recognize. On April 18, 1983, a truck bomb shattered the American Embassy in Beirut, and Iran was blamed for the explosion. Even so, Washington did not anticipate another attack by the same Iranian-backed groups that would destroy the Marine barracks near the airport in Beirut six months later. The attacks led to the departure of the US Marines from Lebanon in early 1984. Israel remained in southern Lebanon for eighteen years until June 2000, and over 1200 Israeli soldiers died in that period mostly killed by the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah forces. By 2006, when Israel invaded Lebanon again to defeat Hezbollah, some of the same
weapons that were made in Israel and delivered to Iran after the revolution were found in Hezbollah’s possession, and used to fight Israel.

Even so, many in Israel have lamented the loss of their Iranian friends, believing that by being forced to work with the Arabs now to contain Iran, Israel has picked the wrong friends. Iran should have been Israel’s rightful ally if the course of the Iranian-Israeli history had not been derailed by the Iranian revolution. The sense of tragedy over Israel’s failed relations with Iran continues to influence the ranks of Israeli policy and decision makers. However, the rise to power of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has firmly shifted the internal debate over Iran. Motivated to take punitive action against Iran, Netanyahu’s policies have led to growing anxieties about Iran in Israel and within the region. Part of those anxieties is based on a real belief that Iran is a major threat to the stability of the region. But part of it stems from growing understanding that it is difficult for Israel to manage Iran’s regional proxies who feed on durable ideologies that have crossed beyond Iran to reach Israel’s borders.

Since its experience in Lebanon, Iran has concluded that the US lacks strategic patience and staying power in the conflicts that it faces in the Near East region. This grants Tehran an advantage to stretch its influence even to Israel’s borders with help from Damascus. In Syria, the Assad government persisted in staying in power with Iran’s help despite a long-lasting conflict in which the US, Turkey and the Gulf Arab States took sides against Damascus. In better times before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict when the US still had an embassy in Damascus, it was frequently reminded by President Hafez al-Assad that unlike the US, Syria had a long breath.

Addressing the Iranian challenge head on, instead of ignoring it, began with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Iran was able to influence Iraq, using proxy militias and most notoriously Explosively Formed Projectiles (EFPs) that could penetrate US armor. Washington’s hands were too full in Iraq to figure out how to manage the problem of Iran. Iran predicted that sooner or later the US would leave Iraq. Washington had a job to finish in Iraq, but it was also eager to find ways to facilitate the departure of US forces. This meant that it had to accept Iran in the Iraqi equation, even if it did not like Iran’s role. Once diplomacy with Iran became an option, first through brief Iran-US talks in Iraq in May 2007, and next through pre-nuclear deal talks between the two in 2011, Washington pulled out of any serious joint attempts with Tel Aviv to contain Tehran. Individuals such as the former head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, challenged the merits of Netanyahu’s hawkish Iran policies in serving Israel’s best interests when it became clear that Washington was eager to make a deal with Tehran. But ultimately Prime Minister Netanyahu prevailed in pushing for an agenda in Washington, under the Trump administration, that aims to completely disarm Iran of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. To Netanyahu, it was intolerable that Israel should face threats from Iran from Israeli borders with Lebanon and Syria. As a result, he has pushed for Iran’s full regional isolation to ensure that it complies with international demands that it not threaten Israel.

**IRAN AND ARAB CONFLICT ZONES**

The third panel, entitled *Iran and Arab Conflict Zones*, covered different perspectives about Iran’s engagement in conflicts in the Arab world, according to views expressed by the participants. According to most Arab states, Iran’s foreign policy is destabilizing the region.
These states maintain that they cannot trust Iran enough to be able to work with it. Instead of making them comfortable to work with it, Iran has made it increasingly hard to find mutual ground for collaboration. The Gulf Arab States prefer to follow US policy on Iran and not challenge that policy given that there is no other reliable security to be had with Iran in the region. The US maintains that Iran harbors continuing goals of expansion in the region. Iran also does not hesitate to irritate its Arab neighbors.

Even before its revolution, Iran often asserted its will over the Arabs. In the last decade of the Shah’s rule, Iran saw itself as a regional superpower, able to deploy military forces on contested borders. In 1972, it ordered a warship to enter the Shatt al-Arab River (which Iran calls Arvand Rud) without an Iraqi pilot on board, though Iraq had required that all inbound vessels should take on an Iraqi pilot. By 1975, through Saudi and Algerian mediation, Iran and Iraq agreed to divide the river along the *thalweg* centerline. But in 1980, Iraq contested the division of the river and invaded Iran. Earlier in December 1971, Iran’s navy occupied Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs on the eve of the independence of the other claimant, the United Arab Emirates. Since then, the fate of the islands has remained a persistent source of tension between Iran and the Gulf Arab States.

Iran is now imposing its will on the Arabs by getting its forces and proxies closer to the Golan Heights, choosing to be part of Syria’s dangerous internal dynamics. A major concern for the entire region is that a third world war may eventually erupt in Syria and close to Israel’s border, in part triggered by Iran’s actions. The region has failed to devise an effective foreign policy to deal or work with Iran. Immediate geostrategic interests have frequently sidelined the need for long-term diplomacy. As a result, Iran continues to challenge the US and its allies within the region, and increasingly in conflict zones in the Arab world including Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.

Despite this encroachment, the region seems to lack the ability to alter its existing policies on Iran and devise new ones that could encourage the country to avoid engaging in conflict zones in the Arab world. Part of the problem is that Washington has failed to understand the nature of the Iranian challenge fully. Iran’s revolution, though a cause for concern, failed to raise enough red flags to warn Washington about its future challenges. Both the Arabs and Washington were ill prepared to deal with the blowing up of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983, and many subsequent tragedies caused by the tensions between them and Iran. Iran had quickly learned to pressure the US and its Arab allies to get results, and it did not hesitate to confront them in the region. The US had no real preponderant power when it came to handling Iran, and it relied mainly on strengthening its Arab allies to contain Iran. Though these Arab states acquired sophisticated US weapons, it was not enough to challenge Iran. Tehran opted to lead asymmetrical conventional proxy battles in the region for which heavy US weapons were of little use. Iran’s direct and indirect pressures on Iraq’s government ultimately led the US Congress to consider de-funding the war under the Obama administration, and in effect handing the country over to Iran.

Washington’s policies on Iran have often been disjointed since that period, making it difficult for its Arab allies to manage Iran’s challenge. Though the US says it will stay in Syria as long as Iran remains there, it is not clear how long that might be and what real influence it may have on
letting the US enjoy preponderant power over Iran and its allies. At any given point of time, US calculations could quickly change about Iran, especially if both find themselves facing the same enemy, but without yielding concrete results. In the aftermath of 9/11, for example, to defeat the Taliban, the US engaged in the Bonn Talks with Iran over the future of Afghanistan, in which Iran played a role bringing Afghan parties to agree on how to lead their future government. Though the Iranian delegation was instructed by Tehran to focus in the talks only on Afghanistan, for the rest of 2001 and early in 2002, there were indications that Tehran was prepared to consider the possibility of having a dramatically better relationship with Washington. It was also in discussions with the US about the rendition of the Afghan commander Gulbeddin Hikmatyar. Despite it, President Bush labeled Iran an “axis of evil” state along with Iraq and North Korea in his 2002 State of the Union address. His targeting of Iran as an enemy of the US did not quite work as intended. Hikmatyar was released from house arrest in Iran, and returned safely to Afghanistan, instead of being handed over to the Americans.

Iran’s efforts to negotiate with the US over Iraq are often inconclusive as well. In 2007, the US and Iran led talks in Iraq to rein in militias that undermined the central government in Baghdad, presided over by then Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki. The talks failed to yield results, and ended in early 2008. Maliki, convinced that his only option was to take direct action, launched an offensive against rebel Shia strongholds in Sadr City in Baghdad and in Basra. Despite an apparent defeat, Sadrists soon re-emerged in Iraqi politics as a strong force, retained contacts with Iran, and pressured Maliki to call for the departure of US forces from Iraq. By the time President Obama came to office, with an initial promise to downsize troops in Afghanistan and in Iraq, he was eager to turn over a new leaf with Iran and make a nuclear deal. The Trump administration withdrew from the deal in May 2018, and says that it remains open to new talks with Iran.

The ever changing power dynamics between the US and Iran have made it impossible for them to talk in any consistent manner. Tehran believes that it should rely on itself rather than try to work everything out with the United States. To Iran, the Arab states that have long worked with the US and that surround some of Iran’s borders represent partially failed rather than well-functioning states, precisely because they rely on Washington rather than on themselves. Without Washington’s support, Tehran argues that these Arab states could collapse, in part because they tend to import security from the US through major arms deals rather than develop their security based on real indigenous capabilities.

As the US fails to fully address the Iranian challenge, the Arab world suffers too. There is growing resentment among the Arabs about Iran’s regional role, a factor that could fuel violence between Arabs and Iran. Iran maintains that the Arab states are engulfed by mounting problems of their own, including terrorism led largely by Arab nationals, perpetual regional conflicts that they are unable to resolve, lack of leadership, and disjointed GCC policies. Taken in this context, Tehran believes that it has no choice but to remain involved in and help manage Arab conflict zones. Without Iran, in fact, Tehran claims that Iraq and Syria would have collapsed and fallen into the hands of the Islamic State. For example, Iran seized on the call by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for Iraqis to defend their country against IS forces. Iran strengthened militias outside the control of Baghdad under its own command to repel IS forces. The same militias, popularly known as Hashd al Shaabis successfully ran a campaign to win seats in Iraq’s parliamentary
election in May 2018, and to influence the next government in Baghdad. Iran has been the group’s biggest supporter, insisting that there was no point in dismantling the group as it could only lead once more to the rise of the Islamic State.

Tehran dismisses charges by Arab countries that it causes sectarianism in the region. Iran argues that the key conflicts in the region are not between Shias and Sunnis, but between Sunnis themselves. For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE turned against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 2013. Along with Bahrain and Egypt, they sanctioned Qatar in 2017. Earlier, they had to deal with terrorism led by IS or al-Qaeda whose recruits were mostly Arab nationals. To Iran, this suggests that the main cause for the region’s dysfunctional prospects and the growing number of Arab conflict zones is problems within the Arab world itself that have little to do with Iran.

As a result, Iran does not take the threat from any of its Arab neighbors seriously. It believes the Arab countries have too many problems of their own and cannot effectively challenge Iran. Tehran argues that its Arab neighbors are in denial when they criticize Iran for its interventions in Arab conflict zones. These are zones that the Arab states, left on their own, cannot manage effectively irrespective of Iran’s interventions. For example, the GCC helped lead operations in Libya in 2011. But it left the country in a state of disarray. The GCC has been unable to work effectively with Iraq since the invasion of 2003. It has failed to take a cohesive stance on Syria. In Yemen, the conflict drags on, and there are ongoing tensions on the ground between various parties and not just with the Iranian-backed Houthis. These tensions involve groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood-led Al-Islah party, the supporters of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, al-Qaeda in Yemen, Islamic State forces operating in Yemen, the legitimate Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on how best to manage the conflict.

Not surprisingly, Iran’s threat perceptions are shaped by conflicts that erupt in the Arab world. Iran has been attacked by Arab nationals itself, including by members of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and it is keen to keep them out of Iran. Iran was also a victim of a war led by an Arab state, i.e. Iraq, in the 1980s, in which the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, backed by Arab countries, used chemical weapons against Iran. The eight-year war (1980-1988) may have claimed some one million lives, mostly Iranians, and permanently injured another 100,000 Iranians attacked with chemical gases. Since then, Iran continues to remain perplexed over why its Arab neighbors failed to embrace it when Tehran opted to stay neutral, to avoid tensions with the US, in the Second Gulf War (1990-1991) between Iraq and Kuwait. This was despite Kuwait’s support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran’s attempts to offer proposals for regional cooperation have failed since that period. Tehran now believes that key countries in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are determined to encourage Iran’s disintegration and the dismantling of the Iranian revolution. The presence of US bases in many countries in the Near East means that Iran’s military strategy must remain capable of penetrating the Arab region to prevent being wrapped up and fully contained by the US military. Though the Arab states themselves cannot fight Iran, Tehran is concerned by a potential alliance against it forming between those states together with Israel and the United States.

There are voices in Iran that call on the region to accept the revolution for what it is, a tsunami for which everyone was unprepared. The impact of the Iranian revolution was drastic inside and
outside Iran. Its utopian ideals of uniting the Muslim world were soon shattered by internal and external resistance to the revolution, including in the form of armed street fighting, explosions against revolutionary strongholds, and finally a war with Iraq. The clerics who won the revolution for Iran had no experience running a state. Most had lived in rural areas or came from small seminary schools and towns across Iran or Iraq. Once exposed to the internal conflicts in Iran after the revolution, and the war, the clerics were quick to recognize the importance of mobilizing as a political force. This sealed the Iranian revolutionary model of fully integrating the clergy with the state. For this new clerically led state force, it became imperative to manage the revolution, and fight Iraq in the course of the war. Tehran believed that it was not only fighting the infidels in Iraq led by the oppressive Iraqi Baath party under Saddam Hussein, but that it was also defending the oppressed Shia Iraqis who could not stand up to the party.

But the revolution would have died, according to its followers, had it not been aspirational. It aspired to build a model Islamic state, and encourage unity across the Muslim world. Iran insists that it still aspires to achieve the same goals. It opposed colonialism, imperialism, and said it would fight for the rights of the oppressed when the revolution took place. It was this early aspirational character that allowed Iran to win proxies to fight for its causes in the Arab world. The revolution also taught Iran how to rally the masses against a cause, by using religion. As indicated, the revolution’s early recruits came from small towns and rural areas, and the impoverished urban masses for whom religion played an important role. The revolution also empowered the Shias, who had long been a marginal force in the region. It insisted on Shia solidarity, as a means to secure the revolution itself.

Since then, Tehran insists that there is a rising Islamic narrative that has emerged and strengthened across the region, among both Shias and Sunnis thanks to the Islamic revolution. It believes that countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE need to exaggerate the fear that Iran’s Islamic narrative causes, and call it sectarian, in order to distract attention away from the fact that the idea of a revolution may actually appeal to their own citizens. Iran is charged with harboring ill intentions in promoting this Islamic narrative. Saudi Arabia believes, for example, that Iran gives priority to pilgrimage to Iraqi shrine cities, rather than accepting the authority of the Saudi leadership as custodians of the holy Muslim cities of Makkah and Madinah. Clerics in Iran dismiss these charges, and insist that there is no holy site in the Muslim world that would be as important and worthy of pilgrimage to them as Makkah and Madinah.

There are many clerics in Iran who would prefer to engage in inter- and intra-faith dialog with their counterparts in the Arab world, if political tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia were to subside. Given the lack of state-to-state diplomacy between Iran and Saudi Arabia specifically, clerics might help build bridges. Such bridge-building efforts, these Iranian clerics hope, will help lift the government of President Hassan Rouhani out of its current political isolation caused by renewed sanctions on Iran and the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. President Rouhani condemned the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran, and repeatedly reached out to countries such as Kuwait and Oman to reconnect with Saudi Arabia, an offer that the kingdom rejected. Since Saudi Arabia had reached out to former Iranian presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, Tehran holds on to the hope that it will improve relations with Iran again while Rouhani remains in office.
CONCLUSION

In the Near East region, Iran’s deliberate export of its revolutionary aspirations is a challenge. Iran has made its neighbors anxious, through its repeated attempts to re-shape geopolitical and strategic calculations and realities in the region. While this is a source of pride for revolutionary Iran, it comes at a huge disservice to those who observe Iran from afar. Iran appears to have expended considerable resources to secure its revolution and spread its influence in the region. Its support for the Shias across the region has increased tensions with Arab governments, and marginalized Arab Shias in their own societies. It refuses to halt intervening in the Arab world and in Arab conflict zones, and in so doing, widens the gap between itself and its neighbors.

Iran believes that it is situated in a region in which many states are not functioning well, and have come to depend for their security on the United States. If these states were to collapse, in part because their security relies on foreign support, Iran will suffer from its repercussions and the region will remain in perpetual instability. Seen from this vantage point, Iran argues that its involvement in Arab conflict zones is a necessary measure as it helps its proxies restore security in the face of aggression in countries such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. It also faults many of the US Arab allies for their inability to effectively address and resolve conflicts that surround them in the region. Blaming Iran’s interventions as a cause for these conflicts covers far more complex realities in the region that point, in Iran’s view, to the fact that the US Arab allies are unable to guarantee regional security.

Often, Iranian interventions end up hurting not just the credibility of the revolution but also the Arab people. Iran’s involvement in Syria may have perpetuated the conflict there, and for years turned many of Iran’s Arab neighbors against Damascus. Iran’s role in Yemen did not help the Yemeni people. It prolonged the conflict there by dividing the Yemenis faster and quicker than any other force could have. Iran rejects a major role for the United States and Israel in the region, and supports proxies to help it contain both countries that it views as a source of instability. This has led to an opening between the Arabs and Israel to contain the Iranian threat. When its neighbors turn assertive and try to stop Iran from triggering further imbalances in the region by taking sides against them, Tehran faults these Arab states for not accepting Iran’s revolutionary aspirations to build a region-wide security system that does not rely on the United States. Tehran further expects these Arab states to embrace the revolution, despite Iran’s many foreign policy failures to convince its neighbors to trust and work with it. It also tries to exploit the power imbalances between its Arab neighbors to its own advantage.

Iran believes that its actions in the region are justifiable. It argues that it is a country that is surrounded by conflicts in the Arab world that, left unaddressed, could harm Iran itself. As a victim of a war with Iraq in the 1980s, Iran is keen to prevent the outbreak of a similar war in which Arab states would rally to defeat Iran. It remains equally concerned by US and Israeli provocations to encourage Arabs to unite against Iranian regional interventions that Tehran believes are necessary to keep conflicts away from its own borders. In the process, Iran uses its Shia ideology to build permanent alliances with like-minded groups in the Arab world.

As a result of these actions, Iran has a difficult time convincing its neighbors that its actions are non-threatening. Given Iran’s strong military capabilities and power projections in the region, it
is often seen as a country that can stir unrest. Its pragmatic policies to reach out to its neighbors are viewed with suspicion. Iran’s revolutionary aspirations are part and parcel of its foreign policy conduct in the region, which makes its neighbors fearful of Iranian power and influence. Working with Iran is not easy as its interests can often clash with those of its neighbors as they too seek power and influence in the region. Iran’s difficult relationship with Saudi Arabia in particular is concerning because as custodian of the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah the kingdom will not grant Tehran a chance to claim leadership in the Muslim world in a manner that may undermine Riyadh’s stature and influence.

The strategy of balancing ties with Iran in the region persists, but with difficulty. In the absence of trust between Iran and its neighbors, rather than seeking solid answers from within the region, the countries in Iran’s neighborhood depend on great powers to help deal with the Iranian challenge. With Saudi Arabia rejecting options for talks with Iran, and pressuring other GCC states to comply with its desire to keep Iran contained, the political space for mediation with Iran within the region is fast shrinking. Oman continues to play a critical role in trying to mediate with Iran. It also works with Tel Aviv and Washington to figure out how to manage the Iranian challenge. The former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s March 2018 visit to Oman, followed by a visit by Prime Minister Netanyahu in October 2018, may indicate that Muscat has revived its role in regional mediations with Iran. But it remains to be seen if it will succeed in reviving good relations with Iran or at least minimizing the regional tensions with it.
SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Michael Cook
Dr. Cook is Princeton University Professor of Near Eastern Studies and Director of Graduate Studies. He was educated at Cambridge University and at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. His work has been concerned with the formation of Islamic civilization, and the role played over the entire range of Islamic history by a particular Islamic value al-amr bi’l-ma’ruf—roughly, the duty of each and every Muslim to tell people off for violating God's law. He is the author of seven books including Ancient Religions, Modern Politics: The Islamic Case in Comparative Perspective (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); and, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Reissue Edition 2010). He is the recipient of the Andrew Mellon Foundation’s Distinguished Achievement Award, the Farabi International Award in the Humanities and Islamic Studies, and the Holberg Prize. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a member of the American Philosophical Society, a corresponding fellow of the British Academy, and an honorary fellow at King’s College, Cambridge.

Dr. Banafsheh Keynoush
Dr. Keynoush is a Short-Term Professional scholar at Princeton University, and a non-resident fellow at the International Institute for Iranian Studies (IIIS). She received her PhD in international relations from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. She was previously a visiting scholar at the Sharmin and Bijan Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at Princeton University, and a visiting fellow at the King Faisal Center for Islamic Studies and Research in Saudi Arabia. Previously an assistant and adjunct professor, her work focuses on foreign policy issues, Iran and the Middle East. She is the author of Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes? (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Arabic edition Dar AlSaqi, 2016; Persian edition Zarir Publishing, 2017).

Dr. Saeed M. Badeeb
Dr. Badeeb is the President of the Center for Research and Analysis in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. He has served in the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and was political advisor to the Saudi embassy in Washington in 1981. He is the recipient of a number of decorations from the United States of America, the Kingdom of Morocco, the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Republic of South Korea, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and several other Arab countries. He is the author of five books, including The Saudi-Iranian Relations from 1932 to 1982 (London: Center for Arab and Iranian Studies, 1983); and The Saudi-Egyptian Conflict over North Yemen from 1962 to 1970 (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986). His most recent book is on relations between Saudi Arabia and Morocco (published in Arabic in Morocco by Almutaqi, Muhamadiah, Dar al-Beidaa, and in English translation). He received a BA and MA from Karachi University, and a master’s degree and Ph.D. from George Washington University.

Dr. Hamad H. Albloshi
Dr. Albloshi is an assistant professor of political science at Kuwait University. He holds a Ph.D. in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He is the author of The Eternal Revolution: Hardliners and Conservatives in Iran (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), the author of journal papers on the orange movement in Kuwait, the ideological
roots of the Houthi movement in Yemen, and sectarianism and the Arab Spring in the case of the Kuwaiti Shias.

**Dr. Abdullah Baabood**

Dr. Baabood is the former director of the Center for Gulf Studies at Qatar University. Prior to joining Qatar University, he spent several years as Director of the Gulf Research Center at Cambridge University. His academic and research interests focus mainly on the economic, social and political developments of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and their external relations. He is the author of several publications in this field, and graduated with a Master in Business Administration (MBA), a Master in International Relations (MA) and a doctorate in International Political Economy from the University of Cambridge.

**Dr. Özden Zeynep Oktav**

Dr. Oktav is professor at İstanbul Medeniyet University in the Department of International Relations. She is the author of books entitled *Limits of Relations with the West: Turkey, Syria and Iran* (2008), *Changing Dynamics of the Arab Gulf and Saudi Arabia*, and *US-Iran Relations* (2011). She is the co-editor of *GCC-Turkey Relations: Dawn of a New Era* (2015), and, *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy* (2011). She has published articles on Turkish-Middle East relations, was awarded the Government of Turkey’s Council of Higher Education scholarship in 2011, and the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey scholarship in 2013. She was Visiting Researcher at Cambridge University in 2011, and at St. Andrews University in 2013.

**Dr. Nursin A. Guney**

Dr. Güney is professor of international relations and Dean of Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences at BAU Cyprus University. She has been appointed recently to Turkey’s Presidential Security and Foreign Policy Council, and is the vice-president and a security and nuclear energy fellow at the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM). She contributes to BiLGESAM by writing analytical essays on security issues. She has published articles on the Middle East, US foreign and security policies, the EU, NATO and on issues related to arms control and disarmament, and energy and migration. She is a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and of the Board of Directors of the International Geostrategic Maritime Observatory. She is a commentator on national Turkish television and international TV networks, and contributes opinion pieces to Turkish newspapers.

**Dr. Steven N. Simon**

Dr. Simon is John J. McCloy ’16 Professor of History at Amherst College. He served in the White House under presidents Clinton and Obama respectively as NSC Senior Director for counterterrorism and Middle East and North African Affairs. He is currently working on a new book, *The Long Goodbye: The United States and the Middle East from the Islamic Revolution to the Arab Spring* (Penguin/ Random House, forthcoming). He is the co-author of *The Age of Sacred Terror* (Random House, 2004), and, *The Pragmatic Superpower: The United States and the Middle East in the Cold War* (W.W. Norton, 2016). He has a BA in classics and Near Eastern Languages (Columbia University), MTS (Harvard Divinity School), MPA (Princeton University), and has held fellowships at Brown University, Oxford University and the American Academy in Berlin.
Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker
Ambassador Crocker is Visiting Lecturer and Diplomat-in-Residence at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University, on leave of absence from Texas A&M where he is executive professor and former dean of the Bush School of Government and Public Service. He was a career Foreign Service Officer who served six times as an American Ambassador, being posted to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait and Lebanon. Three of these appointments were under Republican Administrations and three under Democratic Administrations. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award, in 2009. Other recent awards include the inaugural Bancroft Award, presented by the Naval Academy in 2016. Also in 2016, he was named an Honorary Fellow of the Literary and Historical Society at University College, Dublin, where he was presented the annual James Joyce Award. He is an Honorary Marine.

Ambassador (Ret.) Seyed Hossein Mousavian
Dr. Mousavian is a Middle East Security and Nuclear Policy Specialist at the Program on Science and Global Security at Princeton University. He is a former diplomat who served in a host of positions as Iran’s Ambassador to Germany (1990-1997), Head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran’s National Security Council (1997-2005), Spokesman for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the international community (2003-2005), Foreign Policy Advisor to the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2005-2007), and Vice President of the Center for Strategic Research for International Affairs (2005-2009). He earned a PhD in international relations from the University of Kent, and he is the author of *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012). His latest book, *Iran and the United States: An Insider’s view on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace*, was published by Bloomsbury Publishers in May 2014.

Dr. Ahmad Iravani
Dr. Iravani is the president of the Center for the Study of Islam and the Middle East and a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at the Catholic University of America (CUA). Since 2000, he has taught courses on Islamic law and modern Iran at UC DAVIS, George Washington University, and CUA. Ayatollah Iravani received the highest degree in Islamic Studies (*Ijtihad*) in 1997 (Qom), and the First Kharej Degree (equal to a PhD) in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University in Qom (1992). In 2010, he received his PhD at the Iranian Institute of Philosophy in Tehran. His previous work includes Dean of the Philosophy School, Mofid University (1996-2000), and President of the Center for Islamic Studies, Zimbabwe (1987-1990). He has been involved in inter- and intra-faith dialogue for the last 35 years. Since 2014, he has contributed as speaker to the World Economic Forum, was a member of the forum’s Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith in 2014-2016, and recently became a member of the network of the forum’s Global Future Councils.